no scripture text only

UMNT - 10-10-76 19: 11-12

GOD IN THE SILENCE
I Kings 19:9-16
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It is unfortunate that the significant events in life do not ~~present themselves~~ happen with nearly as much precision and clarity as they ~~do when they are~~ have later recreated when in literature, drama or film. In the concluding segment of the television series, Moses, the Lawgiver, ~~which was shown on television recently~~, the children of Israel were about to rebel at the prospect of having to fight their way into the promised land. "Better to live under oppression than to die in the desert," they said. Moses, ~~after~~ having ~~leading~~ them through the wilderness across the years, stubbornly insisting that they continue, went up onto a mountain in desperation and asked God simply to releive him of ~~this~~ the ~~onerous~~ onerous responsibility of leading an ungrateful and rebellious people. In the film he is answered by a voice - presumably the voice of God - which sounds suspiciously like Burt Lancaster speaking through a megaphone. The voice tells him that God will never let him go and that not only must he continue to lead the people but he, Moses, will ~~die before he personally enters~~ not be permitted to enter the promised land.

Now, that is not very good news. But ~~at least~~ Moses got an answer: on film, at least Moses heard a voice. That is to say, God made contact, Moses had some reliable, personal evidence that God exists and * ~~even though his burden would continue, his life made some sense~~ - ~~He had heard the word of God.~~

* was attentive to his dilemma, and responsive to his cry of desperation. Even though the burden would continue unabated, Moses' life made sense - he could go on - he had heard the word of God - the voice of God.

(*) How we long even for an audible, articulate "No" to our fervent prayers.

How we long for that precision and clarity. (*) How we wish that just once we might possess some incontrovertible evidence that there is a God and that He cares about us: just one experience on the mountain top during which we heard the voice of God. Now, The Biblical writers don't define or describe ~~the voice of God:~~ God's voice ~~in all probability it did not resemble~~ only the naive would assume that it resembled the film maker's attempt. Whatever it was, however, Biblical man, with alarming regularity, is convinced that he has been addressed particularly and personally by the Creator. In the Bible God tells people to pick up and move: he answers questions: responds to inquiries: dictates laws and at certain times and places conducts full conversations with his people.

But not with us. Should one of our contemporaries claim to have conversed with God, our reaction would be one of suspicious skepticism. Several years ago Paul Simon wrote a song which described the situation for modern man, The Sound of Silence:

"and the people bowed and prayed
to the neon God they made
And the sign flashed out its warning
in the words that it was forming
And the Sign said, 'The words of
the prophets are written on subway walls,
and tenement halls, and whispered,
In the Sounds of Silence."

YES → That seems to be the dillema of modern man. ~~In a major~~ theological work, Langdon Gilkey, of the University of Chicago, ~~writes:~~

"One of the most striking things about ~~our human existence~~ in this epoch is that we notice this relation to an unconditioned as much by its absence as by its presence. We become aware of the problem of an ultimate source, an ultimate meaning or order in things - an ultimate value to what we are and do - ~~to what our tradition calls the problem of God~~ ..... when we cannot seem to find them, when at our depths there seems to be only a painful void" (Naming the Whirlwind, p. 309 - 310)

~~What~~ Gilkey is suggesting ~~in the scholarly language~~ of ~~theology is~~ that modern man perceives God more in terms of his absence than his presence; more in his silence than his word. Common folk would not say it that way, but who among us does not understand the desire for God to do or say something: ~~to confirm~~ our faith and forever put to rest that deepest doubt that perhaps we are alone after all and that the void is all there is?

It occurs to me, however, that our problem may not be theological ~~And yet, perhaps, our problem is Hollywood~~. Perhaps, so much as theatrical. even though we ought to know better, we have based our theological expectations on the ~~theatrical~~ stentorophonic devices of the film maker, or the simple-minded mentality of Biblical literalism. Perhaps our problem is that we think that God really did sound like Burt Lancaster when he addressed Moses and should he ever address us it ought to sound the same. But perhaps it wasn't that way at all for the men of the Bible either. Perhaps God's word for them was a deeply felt, undefinable sense, which, centuries later, came to be described as a voice. Perhaps,

(*) a prodding of the conscience: an itch in the back of the mind: a tentative conviction arrived at through hours of reflection + thought + prayer

they too, doubted and wondered whether they were betting their lives on a figment of their own imagination. | That, I believe, is a suggestion written between the lines of the Elijah story in I Kings 19. | It's a good story. | Allow me to refresh your memory.

The story takes place a long time ago - around 850 B. C. ~~The twelve tribes of Israel had divided the promised land into two nations: Judah, in the South, and Israel with the city of Samaria as its capitol in the North~~. Ahab was the King of Israel. | His wife, the daughter of a Phoenician priest, Jezebel, was ~~her name, and she was~~ a devoted and evangelistic adherent of the Phoenician religion - Baalism. When she came to Israel as queen she brought with her 450 Baal priests, and ~~two~~ 400 prophets of the mother-goddess Asherah.

Many Israelites found this new religion appealing with its seductive emphasis on natural and human fertility. | And when various prophets spoke against Baalism, or its leading disciple in the royal palace, they were promptly executed. Enter Elijah. | Traveling from his home in Gilead he called on King Ahab and announced that because of the infidelity of the people and the royal house there would be a drought throughout Israel. | As soon as he left his prediction began to come true. | For two years the drought continued until Ahab finally discovered Elijah and ~~persuaded~~ summoned him to return. | Again Elijah stated the reasons for the drought, and challenged the adherents of Baal to a test of strength. | All the people were to assemble on Mt. Carmel. | Two bulls were to be slaughtered and the priests

were to call upon Baal to send down fire. Elijah would call on Yahweh, the God of Israel.

~~of Baal were to call down fire - as was Elijah~~. The people were to decide - which God was the true God. The test took place. Elijah was successful: the people shouted "Yahweh is God" and put to death the priests and prophets of Baal. And Ahab gratefully drove his chariot home through a rainstorm with Elijah ecstatically running before him.

But it was a brief victory, ~~however~~. Jezebel was furious when she was told what had happened and vowed to kill Elijah, whereupon the prophet fled for his life. There follows one of the most significant accounts in the Bible. Elijah traveled far: in fear and, we must assume, despair, he asked God to take his life. He ended up in a cave at Horeb, on Mt. Sinai. At night a series of natural cataclysms occured which the prophet watched in awe: a violent windstorm, an earthquake, lightning, fire: all of them phenomena which the Canaanites and Baal worshipers would have interpreted as revelations of God: ~~that is, typical ways for God to speak and act~~ theophanies - ways in which God was expected to manifest Himself. But, the account reads, God, surprisingly, was not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire: but afterward, in the ("still, small voice of calm.") I was intrigued to discover that you really have to stretch the Hebrew words to make them come out that way. A better, and more accurate translation is ["the sound of a gentle silence."] That is to say, it wasn't a voice at all, but the eeerie, deathly stillness that sometimes happens after a storm. It wasn't a resonant, rich baritone voice, but something far less precise - the subjective sense of the prophet that God was near and addressing him.

in the midst of his personal crises

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In any event, what the prophet heard was a question: a rather curious question we should think under the circumstances: "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And then the word of God: "Go - return." Go back to the world: back to work: back to the danger and risk of being God's man. in Israel.

That's the story, and a pregnant one it is. In the first place let's consider the fact that Elijah, running scared, ended up in a cave. He wasn't on a spiritual retreat: he didn't go there to pray and meditate. He hid in a cave because life had become too much for him. By an ironic twist of fate (*) ~~he had experienced victory, vindication, success, only to be confronted by a serious threat to his life.~~ Elijah was ready to call it quits, give up, throw in the towel. (*) and live as a hermit, safe in the isolation of the cave So, it would appear, modern man responds to the irony and ambiguity of life. What is the cave for us?

(*) his moment of victory had turned into the bitterness of defeat. Sweet vindication had become terror before the wrath of the queen. Instead of the court favorite he was, once again, a fugitive.

Davie Napier, Old Testament Scholar, suggests that it comes in mnay forms: drugs, alchohol, sex, T. V. T.A. - Transactional Analysis, T.M. - Transcendential Meditation, T. Z. - try Zen or T.S.- take Sominex: all of them ways modern man seeks to deal with the frustrations and anxieties and perplexities of our life. We live in trying times. In a recent survey cited by Time Magazine a substantial proportion of Americans have simply stopped paying attention to national and international affairs. There is something about the energy crisis, the allegations regarding the C.I.A., the price of oil, and the prospect of both Israel and the Arabs ~~with access to~~ having nuclear weapons with which the individual nervous

(*) Sometimes, the pressures of the world are mirrored in our personal lives: crises come in series: | sailing along merrily in life, the bottom seems to fall out sometimes and we wonder if we have the resources to go on . . .

system cannot or will not cope. (*) | And so all of us begin to cast side-long glances for the nearest cave.

Sometimes what we find is religion: | sometimes we look to the Church to shelter us from the storms of life. | It is no mere coincidence that in the fifties - that most stable and quiet era in recent history, mainline Protestant Churches experienced significant growth and displayed robust health. But in the sixties, when national life became devilishly complex under the assault of civil rights, and VietNam and a new concern for poverty - and the mainline churches plunged into the issues, those churches began to decline in numbers and financial strength. | The churches that grew and are still growing were those that had very little to say about the pressing and urgent issues of the day. | People, it seems, prefer the cave. (*) Elijah, however, was called out of his cave by the word of God.

(*) particularly when it comes to religion

Consider, in the second place, the fact that Elijah was looking in the wrong places for God and listening to the wrong sounds. | Impressed with a dramatic display of natural phenomena, Elijah must have been moved, inspired. | In his time of danger and distress a God of wind and earthquake and fire, (*) had a certain practical appeal. | But God wasn't in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. | God's presence was not known in the loud noise, the spectacular display. | Rather, God came to Elijah afterward, out of a stillness so quiet that it was audible. | So it may be that God is silent for us because we look in the wrong places and listen to the wrong sounds.

(*) & God of conspicuous power,

Certainly we have noise enough. The philosopher Schopenauer observed that, "To be alone is the fate of all great minds - a fate deplored at times but still always chosen as the less grievious of two evils." Perhaps so. But how rare it is that in the normal course of our lives any of us experience silence and aloneness. On the contrary our ears and minds and senses are assaulted twenty four hours a day. Musak follows us into the dentist chair, the department store, even the beach. And when the other sounds of life threaten to interfere we, some of us that is, plug it directly into our ear. George Buttrick wrote, "Our age is restless and noisy: city congestion and distraction war against the soul. ('Be still and know that I am God.') In the din of traffic we may be deaf to steeple bells, but in the quiet night we hear..." (Prayer p 254) ~~Again, perhaps~~: ~~if we are quiet~~. A noble sentiment, but in the year of our Lord 1975 - even the nights are noisy. While attending a semi- recently

I visited ~~recently~~ several old Quaker Meeting Houses in the Philadelphia area and renewed my appreciation for the beauty and value of the quiet worship experience. A friend of mine, a Presbyterian minister, ~~attended~~ went to the Quaker meeting on Sunday morning and reported that he found the extended silence almost unbearable. (*) Perhaps God is silent for us because we have forgotten the art and discipline of quiet listening.

(*) We are unaccustomed to being quiet - to listening - to being aware of our own minds & thoughts & feelings.

Consider, in the third place what Elijah heard when he perceived the work of God: "What are you doing here in the cave - go back to Israel."

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One of my lingering suspicions is that God seems to be silent, not so much because he hasn't spoken to us, but because we don't like what he is saying. And one of my lingering convictions is that modern Christianity is most irrelevant when it refuses to hear essentially the same word of God that came to Elijah: "What are you doing here - go back."

As was the case with Elijah modern Christians feel an overwhelming sense of powerlessness when they confront the problems of the world. And the temptation is always very real to back away from the frustration of that confrontation and then to try to justify it by taking the position that the world is secular, evil, sinful and the essence of religion is to cultivate holiness, goodness and piety apart from the world.

In an excellent new book, Survival and Mission for the City Church, Gaylord Noyce of Yale Divinity School writes, "Basically we have a theological decision to make. We may look upon the world as evil and shun it, choosing available proof texts to justify ourselves, building enclaves that sustain Christian faith for those few born into the community and attracted by it. Or we can recognize the world as ambiguous, a source of good and evil and the region into which Christians are called to move as leaven and seasoning to whatever extent they are able." (p 152)

That is to say, whether a particular Church is involved

in the world is not a product of its liberalism or conservatism, it is not a product of its politics or its sociology. It is, quite simply, a measure of the Church's willingness to obey the word of God. In the final analysis it is a theological question: a question of the incarnation. For God has spoken ultimately and eloquently in the life of his son - who was born in the world, lived in the world and died in the midst of a most unruly worldly set of circumstances. "God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son." That's the way the Fourth Gospel has it - and the Church of Jesus Christ is summoned to be the continuing vehicle of that redeeming and healing love. "What are you doing here? Go back - return to the world." That is the word of God to Elijah and, I would submit, it is God's word to us.

Elijah was trying to escape from the pain and frustration and danger of the world by hiding in a cave. Outside there was the promise only of more pain and frustration and further danger. And one thing else - the healing and redeeming love of God. For God was in the silence for Elijah after the wind and earthquake and fire.

One time, 900 years later, on a hill outside Jerusalen a man was crucified. A crowd of jeering people stood at the foot of his cross: mocking him, taunting that if the power of God were in him surely he would save himself. God was silent for them. But to others - to millions upon millions of men and women the silence of Calvary is the most eloquent - the dearest word God has ever spoken.

As our Lord came to the disciples on the stormy lake, so God has promised to be with us

That is the promise of Christian Faith. God will come in the silence. God will come in pain and despair, in sickness and in fear. ~~God will be with us~~.

But he will not be heard without disciplined listening. God cannot be known without the risk of faith - that tentative step out of the cave. And God cannot be served without concrete involvement in the world he loves.

Those are the circumstances in which men, beginning with Elijah, have heard the voice of God in the silence. And that is the great invitation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to you and me. ["Listen - Believe - Go back to the world."]

Amen

Father, give us quiet moments in the midst of the noises of the world. Give us faith to hear your gracious word. And give us courage to follow when you would lead us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.